

An Introduction to the Installations of Brian Eno:
Long Now Thinking Part I

By Joseph Snodgrass

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ABSTRACT

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by Joseph Snodgrass

Through a career spanning over 35 years, Brian Eno has continually produced amazing work. He has been the producer for bands such as U2, David Bowie, and Coldplay. Along with being a writer, producer, painter, musician, and installation artist (to name a few of his talents), he has continued to allow his work to evolve, all the while continuing to demonstrate Long Now ideals through slow, thoughtful, and most importantly, responsible art.

This paper is dedicated to C.S.J. Bofop & Carl Sagan.

Their ideals and philosophies continually inspire and guide me.

And for my children:

May your generation see wonders undreamt.

"Why haven't we seen a photograph of the whole Earth yet?" read the face of a button sold for twenty-five cents in 1966. A 28 year old Stanford University graduate, Stewart Brand, felt that such an important question should not be kept to himself.¹

This button spoke for an entire nation, and people noticed. Within the two years following, an astronaut had taken a color photograph of the Earth from the Moon and in turn our planet has become a recognizable image to us. Since then the image has been used to grace the covers and pages of many publications including Brand's own revolutionary "Whole Earth Catalog." It is immediately identified as an idea of "all things" that incorporate humankind.

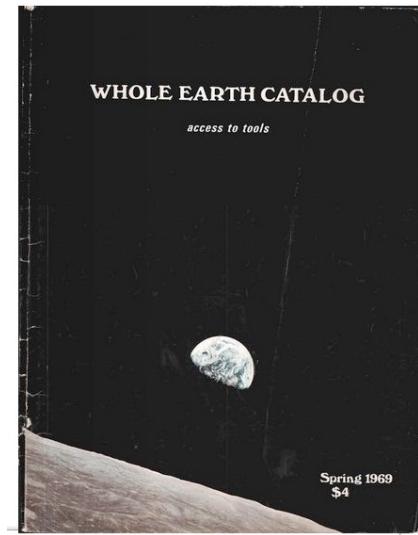


Fig. 1 Whole Earth Catalog, 1969.

Eleven years from the time those buttons were made NASA launched the *Voyager 1* space craft with a mission of exploring the outer solar system and then interstellar space. With its primary mission completed as *Voyager* left the solar system some 12 years later it was to power down its cameras in order to reserve power for the long, uneventful journey ahead. But before doing so, Astronomer Carl Sagan had requested that the space craft turn around and take a photograph of the Earth, not only for scientific reasons, but for the human reason: to gain a perspective of our place in the cosmos.

The installations of Brian Eno are precisely motivated by the same idealism behind these two images of the Earth. Eno, known widely as the father of Ambient Music, is also a multi-platform artist with works in varying mediums consisting of paint, light, photography, PVC piping, software, video, and music to name a few. It is through these together, the installations

of Brian Eno, that we will see a consistent message about perspective and how we should view time and our responsibility not only as artists (creatively), but as humanity as a whole. We will see, in three phases of his career, how the works of Brian Eno demonstrate responsible long term concepts, endearing us to consider slower, better thinking as a counterpoint to today's accelerating culture.

A primary thing to understand first about the work of Brian Eno, which ultimately is an all encompassing display of his progression of mind, are the ideals behind it. While many people can be pinned as "founding" any one philosophy, in the case of the Long Now, it is really more of a collective of similar ideas. Much in the same way Eno developed *Oblique Strategies* with painter Peter Schmidt.

In the early 1970's, both Eno and Schmidt had been writing down simple aphorisms that they could turn to in order to jog the mind from the cramping of high stress situations. In the studio, especially under time constraints, one is likely to only take a very narrow set of options and attempt to force these to work. Sometimes this is successful, sometimes not. From the creative view, forcing something is never a success. The *Strategies*, were designed to be a "tangential [way] of attacking problems that were in many senses more interesting than the direct head-on approach."² A creative, outside-of-the-box, and yet random and fruitful way of solving problems. This is at the core of Long Now thinking and is certainly seen throughout the work of Brian Eno.

But how can we better define the Long Now methodology? Well, let's strip it of its temporal nature. "Now" does not exist. It is a reference to a feasibly current condition and in the Long Now we consider time as more of a state. Our timescale is infinite and even the calculation of precise time is impossible. Typically we try and perfect time, perfect our measurements of it. We attempt to live by it, in it, and around it. Yet we cannot touch it and when we are faced

with moments like the birth of a child, a moment of great accomplishment, the first time we make love, or the death of a loved one, we are aware of the dual nature of time. How fast and how slow time is. How short and how long.

At a moment when time is everything, time becomes nothing.

Consider the way we move in the world today. The things we struggle for on a day-to-day basis. The speed at which trends change - the news and media, music and fashion and technology, even policies and ideas that affect our society and humanity - is fleeting and fickle.

The Long Now Foundation seeks to be a counterpoint to today's accelerating culture and, through creatively fostering responsibility, make long-term thinking more common. The framework for such thinking is a mere 10,000 years.³ All concepts taken up by the Foundation, be it the 10,000 year clock, the Rosetta disk, or even the method of dating used where all 4 digit years become 5 digit years starting with '0', are geared towards thinking far outside of our general concept of time.

Along with Brian Eno, Stewart Brand is one of the founding members of the Long Now Foundation. In his book *The Clock of the Long Now*, he notes that "The slow stuff is the serious stuff", in partial reference to his "Layers of Civilization", where the quickest moving layer is "fashion" followed by "commerce", "infrastructure", "governance", "culture", and the slowest evolving, "nature". He continues, "Our senses and our thinking habits are tuned to what is sudden, and oblivious to anything gradual." Then after comparing the impossible lottery win

with the certain earning of compound interest, he concludes, "What happens fast is illusion, what happens slow is reality. The job of the long view is to penetrate illusion."⁴

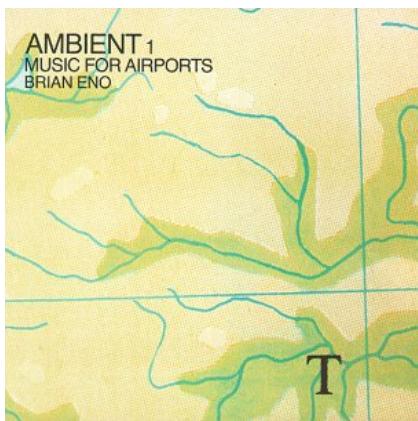


Fig. 2 *Ambient 1: Music For Airports*,

"An ambience is defined as an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence; a tint.

...Whereas the extant canned music companies proceed from the basis of regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies, Ambient Music is intended to enhance these. Whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities. And whereas their intention is to "brighten" the environment by adding stimulus to it (thus supposedly alleviating the tedium of routine tasks and leveling out the natural ups and downs of the body rhythms), Ambient Music is intended to induce calm and a space to think."⁵

The first ideas we see being explored by Eno are purely ambient themes. After becoming tired of the repetitive trends of popular music - that of action, variety, clear song structures and rhythms and most of all voices, "my friends and I," Eno says, "were making and exchanging long cassettes of music chosen for its stillness, homogeneity, lack of surprises and, most of all, lack of variety." They wanted music as part of the ambience of their lives; continuous and surrounding.⁶

Coupled with what the recording studio was slowly becoming, more technologically capable of experimenting with new sounds, new timbres, the forming of this music became much akin to painting, which was something that Eno knew about. He could experiment with making

shapes, creating palettes; working with vertical color of sound.⁷ After all, ambient music was designed to be an aural "tint" to an atmosphere or room. Much like a painted landscape, one could passively notice it or they could find themselves lost in it for as long as they so wish. It became Eno's intention to create a sort of never-ending catalog of a variety of flexible atmospheres with ambient music. In his early experiments he, quite by accident, developed the first in a series of systems that would act as a tool for creating these aural landscapes.⁸

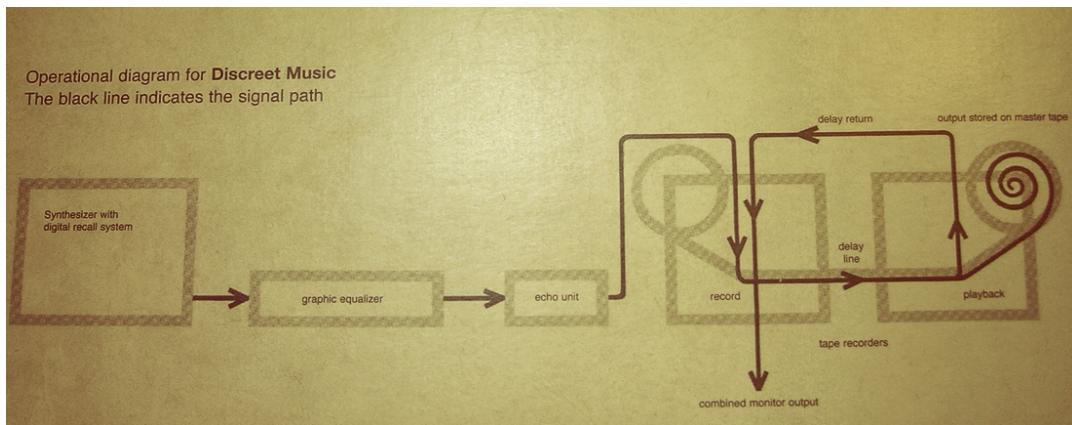


Fig. 3 "Frippertronics" tape delay system, as featured on the artwork for *Discreet Music*, 1975.

This first system, called "Frippertronics" after guitarist Robert Fripp for whom the system was designed, was an infinitely looping tape relay that could take very little input and create a lush, always new backdrop of musical sound. It is similar to the prophetic idea of composer Claude Debussy, who spoke of "music which is entirely free from 'motifs', or rather consisting of one continuous 'motif' which nothing interrupts and which never turns back on itself."¹⁹ This experimenting with tape delay systems continued for some years, successfully producing much of Eno's most important, albeit famous ambient works.

During Eno's time working with Talking Heads in the late 1970's, he came upon a new medium for painting: the video camera. Working and living in New York at the time, Eno had become otherwise confined to his high-rise apartment. The pace at which the world below was

moving was overwhelming to him. In an interview he claimed this represented America in a mediaeval fashion. "Mediaeval for me means somewhere where things are being worked out, where cultures have crossed and are crashing together, and hybrids are constantly being thrown up."¹⁰ He had acquired the camera during a recording session with Talking Heads (from a Journey roadie, none-the-less) but lacked a tripod. As a result, when he arrived home he would set the camera on its side. At one point he left the camera for four hours pointed out the window while recording. The playback was, naturally, a sideways view of the tops of buildings and the New York skyline. And how else should you view this but with the television also on its side? The result when viewing is the light saturated rooftops and slow cumulus

clouds moving within a portrait frame. With the encouragement of a gallery owner and friend, Eno's first installation, a series of video paintings entitled *Mistaken Memories of Mediaeval Manhattan*, was born.



Fig. 4 *Mistaken Memories of Mediaeval Manhattan*, still shot. New York, 1980-81.

What becomes important here is that Eno continues his progression of thinking in the same manner as with the Ambient records; slow-paced, alternative views of the world and, by association, time. "As soon as you acknowledge the possibility of a certain type of being or a certain type of environment, you create that environment, because you tend to select and nourish those facets of that environment."¹¹ He says in an interview some years

later regarding the *Manhattan* installations. In an essay from 2001, Eno elaborates in reference to Martin Luther King's "I have a dream..." speech. "He was inviting others to dream it with him." He continues, "Once a dream becomes shared in that way, current reality gets measured against it and then modified towards it." In short, "The act of imagining it makes it real."¹² Morse Peckham, in his book *Man's Rage for Chaos*, writes: "Art is the exposure to the tensions

and problems of the false world such that man may endure exposing himself to the tensions and problems of the real world." In essence, art and music have become the safe environment to act as a catalyst for society to engage new ways of thinking.¹³

The concept that developed over the following years was to present *Manhattan* and other video painting installations in an insulated environment. Growing up in England, a common place to seek out solitude would be in the many churches that lined the countryside. He would attempt to recreate this with low-light, almost sacred feeling places where people could come to seek a sort of "spiritual" release from the "sinful" world outside. It seems appropriate that people should seek this modern "church" in such a mediaeval city. The proverbial sermon that they would find is, like the accompanying pieces of Ambient music, about accepting the nature of something. T.V., to the common viewer of the time, frequently appeared grainy and coarse. The reason, Eno says, was because, "people were always trying to make it do something that it didn't want to do, it doesn't want to be like film." Like painting, the canvas is not the same as a glossy photograph.¹⁴ Like the state of Stewart Brand's slowest moving layer, nature being the most certain and solid layer, the video paintings were allowed to *be* and be accepted in their true state which is also a naturally evolving state.

"Enormous buildings came and went, careers rose and crashed in weeks. You rarely got the feeling that anyone had the time to think two years ahead, let alone ten or a hundred." Eno said of the time. After visiting a friend who had a trendy upscale apartment in a dank, dark, pothole filled neighborhood of New York, and who was living there quite on a temporary basis, Eno notes, "it seemed selfish, irresponsible and randomly dangerous." He states, "I came to think of this as "The Short Now", and this suggested the possibility of its opposite - "The Long Now".¹⁵

What we see in Eno's earliest installations are elements being explored in an almost experimental fashion, but which in many ways play out in the same manner as even his latest installations. Eno would continue to do his video paintings throughout the 1980's. He would also change his modus from just using television as a light source, to adding physical elements to the mix. Three-dimensional shapes or slightly opal plexiglass windows, for example, would be added to support definition and uncertain ideas, which provided vivid representations that still clouded the purpose. His installations also included ziggurat structures (*Crystals*), dream-like images of boats and canals (*Pictures of Venice*), hanging shapes slowly moving in the ever changing waveforms (*Quiet Club*). A bath undulates in random speeds of stillness as muted primaries shift and unsettled residues float to the left over a blurred nude woman (*Thursday Afternoon*). All the while the visual and occasionally fragrant art, as with the installation *The Future Will Be Like Perfume*, would be accompanied by endless pieces of music marrying together in permutations of varying speeds and textures. The album release of *Thursday Afternoon*, for example, was the first instance of a single piece of music to be written for a full 60 minute CD. Each instant of an installation, each moment a person would view it, was an instant never to be duplicated by anyone at any time. It was unique to that moment. It broke the threshold of predictable music, returning people to something the live performances of old had - or rather, didn't have: recording.



Fig. 5 *Thursday Afternoon*, still shot. San Francisco, 1984.

This is what each installation was about. A show of light and color and music being portrayed in a way it never had before - a "new way of painting" as Eno often referred to it.¹⁶ But also they were about a place without time and immediate context. Like time they were passive and impassive in a moment. According to Eno, some people would realize that nearly nothing was happening and leave, while others would stay for hours and hours.

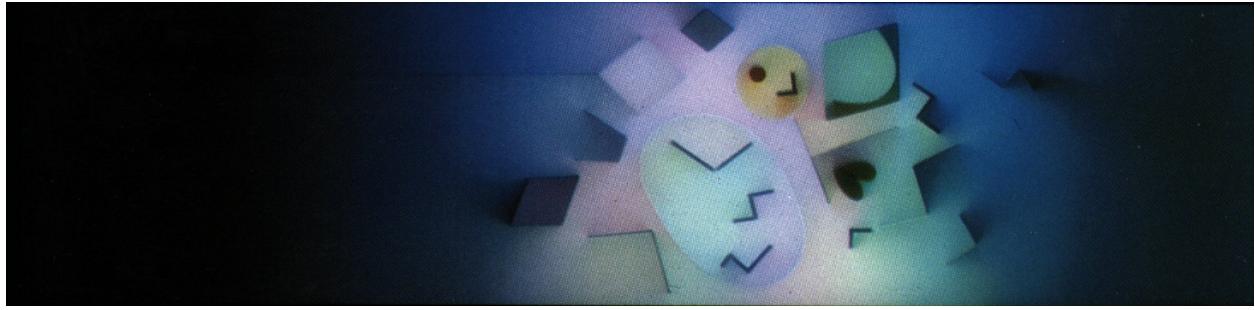


Fig. 6 *Pictures of Venice*, installation photo, 1985.

Still, slowly the installations evolve into something else. While doing the light paintings, Eno begins to use hand painted slides. His methods of live mixing, an editing process similar to mixing music, become more sophisticated. The slides are able to semi-randomly move in and out of the field of view in effect portraying what seem to be animals and other organic figures in his installation *Natural Selections*. The music also takes on a very organic form. "I was thinking of the shows as total environments rather than as collections of objects in a neutral space." He states of his variety of installations of this time. "I began to use different materials - vermiculite, tree trunks, bowls of live fish, ladders, rocks, specially constructed false-perspective tables and chairs and two-dimensional cut-out cutlery- to build places which had some sort of connection to domestic spaces."¹⁷ It was from this that Places, with each installation being a different space and a different designated number, and *Quiet Club*, an urban space, much like a gentlemen's club, a park or garden, or a church, where people might gather to take in peace, arose.

The music for these would be a collection of tracks of different timbres and lengths, all played separately on different CD players placed behind screens around the room. There was a natural acceptance in the fact that perfect syncing was impossible. Instead, the continuance of an organic platform was cultivated. Occasionally the pieces might drift together and create what seems like music. Most of the time the sounds would seem random. Less like cacophony and more like wind chimes or the smoke screen from an orchestra. We see individual aural elements play out in the further installations *Kite Stories*, *Music for Civic Recovery*, or *Compact Forest Proposal* where tracks of music are reused by remixing, recombining, or somehow being marginally recreated and reused, a process Eno calls "composting".

In *Compact Forest Proposal* the music, which has now developed to a point of being referenced as "generative", has taken on a status as a "condition". The installations of this period are all meant to be "like music". Every environment is reflective of the generative and never ending nature of the music. *New Urban Spaces Series No. 4, Compact Forest Proposal*, the title of one installation, was chosen as such to represent a long view concept of, what appears to be, an architectural submission for urban spaces. The installation features lights spiraling like trees combined with various hums and bells and chirps that attribute the generative music, along with other elements such as a mannequin playing the architect standing in a dark corner where he often isn't noticed until one's eyes have adjusted to the light. The idea is to have a sort of "simulated forest" of the future.

More and more we see Long Now ideas come to the fore. Cities are long lasting, if not forever. Must nature adapt, or should we? The ideas presented are important. The long view is mindful of continuing evolution. Like nature, the music of the installations are organic. By it's very name, it generates or creates, breeds, produces. Like nature, the beginnings are incredibly simple. A few seeds are planted, a few parameters set within an ecology, such that the ecology

will perpetually produce a complex forest of sound based on the parameters and algorithms used. We harken back to "Frippertronics" in this sense.

But Generative Music keeps opening out. It demonstrates how nature naturally organizes. How simple organisms are made, how they evolve; how they look after themselves. Eno captures this in an aesthetic representation titled *77 Million Paintings*, a computer software program. Here one is witness to a wide variety of selections from his previous installations as they slowly shift into a virtually never ending painting for your computer monitor. That is to say, you would only ever be able to see the same painting in this program once in several lifetimes if you sat and watched it exclusively the rest of your life. In this, Generative music and the subsequent installations, including the *77 Million Paintings* themed installations, exemplifies long term thinking. It idolizes ever existing life and time as a whole. It realizes cycles and the infinite. As with Eno's earlier installations, any notion of "right now" is abandoned.

Currently Brian Eno still works with the *77 Million* installations. Additionally, he is beginning to work with new concepts, and even curating, under the theme of "scenius". Scenius is a term



Fig. 7 *Luminous*, 77 Million Paintings at Sydney, 2010.

for a proxemic subculture which diffuses from an aesthetic response and evolves into a unique design space to solve complex social problems.¹⁸ The communal form of genius, as it were. It's like a bigger version of 'group think', except risky ideas are appreciated. And, to some extent, it is essentially Brian Eno attempting to get

everyone on the same page as him (and each other for that matter). Responsibility by way of big here and long now thinking.

What previously was metaphor, established by Eno through his work and the aesthetic work of other Long Now members, can become something so much bigger if people work together as a

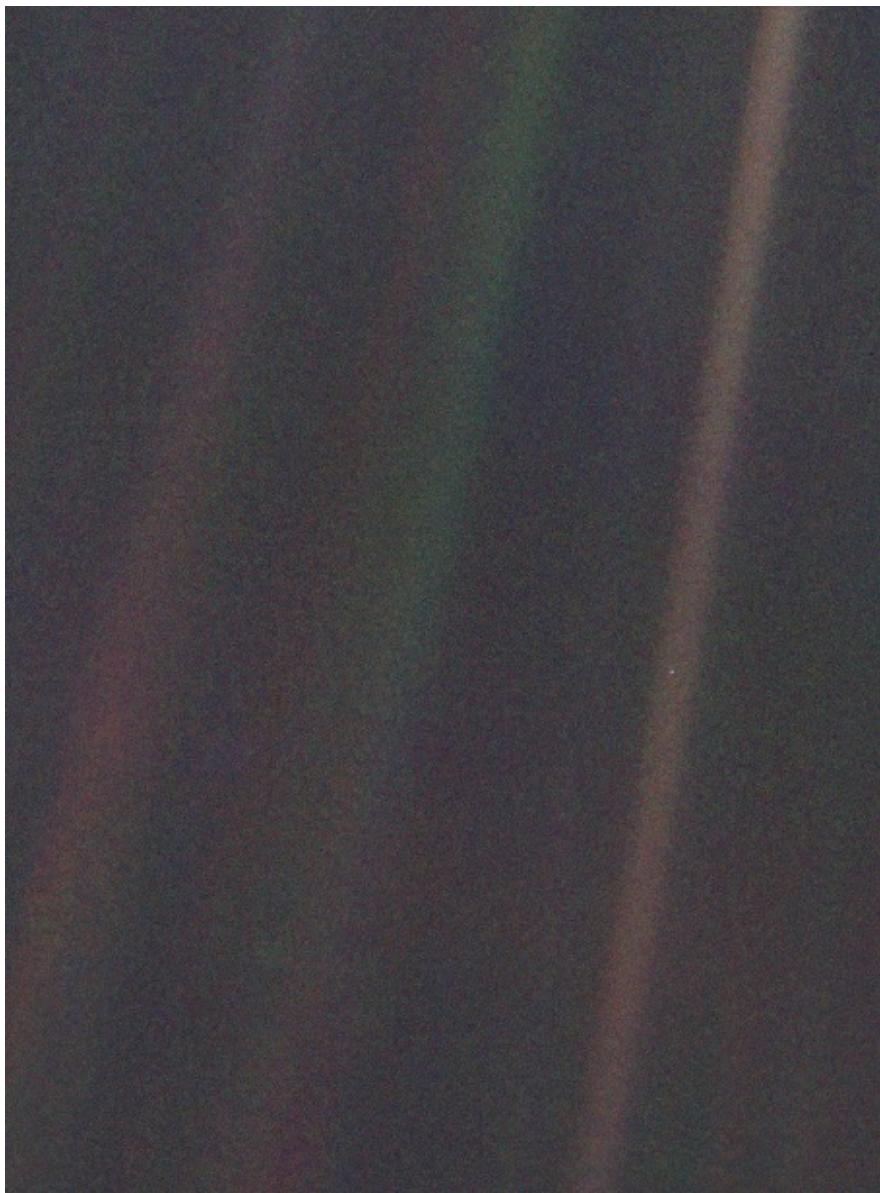


Fig. 8 "Pale Blue Dot", photo taken by the *Voyager I*, N.A.S.A., 1990.

scene. It is an incredibly powerful idea which only has to succeed on the societal level to be affective on the civilization level. We live in a time when the mass population only cares about the 'small here' and a very few of us are seeing things with the wide zoom lens of the Long Now.

When we take in the examples of Brian Eno's installations, or separately as his music, artwork, or ideas; or if we consider the "Whole Earth" image of Stewart

Brand, we are afforded an insight into a perspective of time and the universe that is much larger than the proposed 10,000 years of the Long Now. When we look back at the image presented by *Voyager 1* taken so far from Earth, we are reminded of what Carl Sagan said about his photograph "The Pale Blue Dot":

"From this distant vantage point, the Earth might not seem of any particular interest. But for us, it's different. Look again at that dot. That's here, that's home, that's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader;" every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there — on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."¹⁹

¹ Stewart Brand. *The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), Kindle Edition.

² "Introduction", The Oblique Strategies website, accessed November 03, 2011. <http://www.rtqe.net/ObliqueStrategies/OSintro.html>

³ "About Long Now", The Long Now Foundation website, accessed November 03, 2011. <http://longnow.org/about/>

⁴ Brand, *The Clock of the Long Now...*

⁵ Christoph Cox. *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. Ed. with Daniel Warner. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 96.

⁶ Brian Eno. *A Year With Swollen Appendices: Brian Eno's Diary* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 293.

⁷ Eric Tamm. *Brian Eno: His Music and the Vertical Color of Sound* (New York: De Capo, 1995), 1.

⁸ Tamm, 129.

⁹ David Toop. *Ocean of Sound* (Serpents Tail: London, 1995), 19.

¹⁰ Brian Eno. *14 Video Paintings* (All Saints Records, 2005), DVD insert.

¹¹ Brian Eno. *77 Million Paintings by Brian Eno* (All Saints Records, 2007), Software/DVD insert.

¹² Brian Eno. *The Big Here and Long Now* (The Long Now Foundation, 1999), Essay.

¹³ Cox, 233.

¹⁴ Eno, *14 Video Paintings*.

¹⁵ Eno, *The Big Here and Long Now*.

¹⁶ Eno, *77 Million Paintings by Brian Eno*.

¹⁷ Eno, *77 Million Paintings by Brian Eno*.

¹⁸ "Scenius, or Communal Genius", [KK.org](http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/06/scenius_or_comm.php), The Technium, accessed November 01, 2011. http://www.kk.org/thetechnium/archives/2008/06/scenius_or_comm.php

¹⁹ Carl Sagan. *Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space* (New York: Random House, 1994), 45.